

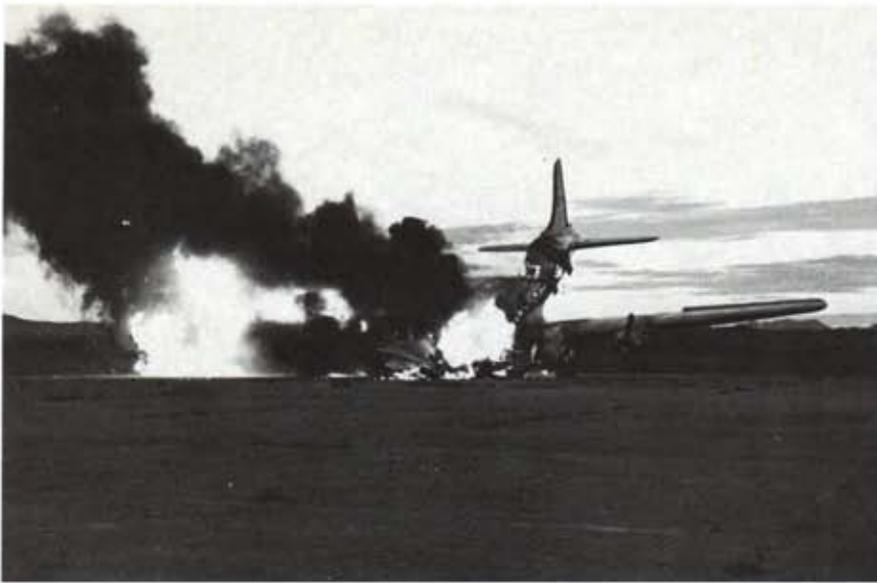
The first hot conflict in the Cold War was a turning point in the Air Force's first 50 years.

THE AIR WAR IN **KOREA**



For many, the natural metal finish and sweptwings of this F-86, flown by fighter ace Lt. Col. George I. Ruddell, epitomize the air war in Korea. The aerial combat that took place between 1950 and 1953 was more than MiG vs. Sabre; however, rare color photography on the following pages shows other sides of the war that introduced a newly independent service to the hot side of the Cold War.





On June 25, 1950, North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung hurled his troops across the thirty-eighth parallel, expecting to unite the Korean peninsula under his Communist regime. Statements from US government officials implying that South Korea was outside American interests and the postwar disarmament of the US led the North Koreans to anticipate little resistance. Symbolic of the lack of preparation for the war that ensued is this Military Air Transport Service Douglas C-54, burning at Kimpo AB, South Korea, after a strafing by North Korean Yak fighters.



Charles Morehouse via Warren Thompson



Jim Ferr via Warren Thompson

President Harry S. Truman ordered US air and naval forces to assist the South Koreans on June 27, 1950, and a United Nations resolution called for international assistance. The task of air defense fell to USAF's Far East Air Forces, equipped in July 1950 with 921 F-80, F-51, F-82, B-29, and B-26 combat aircraft, 468 support aircraft, and 54,477 personnel. At left, among the first major movements of aircraft rushed to the FEAFF were these 145 Air National Guard F-51 Mustangs, accompanied by 70 experienced pilots, headed for Japan aboard the carrier USS Boxer.

"First blood": In North American Aviation F-82s like the one at right, Lts. William G. Hudson and Charles B. Moran and Maj. James W. Little scored the first kills of the Korean War over Kimpo AB on June 27, 1950.



Charles Toler via Warren Thompson



Lockheed's F-80s were considered by some to be too fast for the strafing mission. They proved to be an outstanding support weapon, however, their speed making them less vulnerable to ground fire than piston-engine fighters were. Stable platforms for their six .50-caliber machine guns, they were hampered only by short range, corrected by the addition of "Misawa" tiptanks like those on the F-80s (above) from the 8th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, returning from a May 1951 mission. The tanks strained the wingtips but gave the fighter as much as 45 additional minutes in the air.

The F-80 was also tough. At right, amazed crew members surround a fighter that returned to base after a low-level bomb run in North Korea, where it had hit a cable strung across a narrow valley. Though a sizable portion of the right wing had been sheared off, the skilled pilot flew the plane back to Suwon AB, South Korea.

RF-80As, less powerful but longer-range Shooting Stars, flew photoreconnaissance missions deep into North Korea to determine targets for fighter-bombers.



Chuck Baasden via Warren Thompson



Via Robert F. Dorr

The US Navy and Marines also moved into the jet age during Korea. Carriers had significant responsibility in close air support and interdiction of Communist supply lines. At right is a view from "Vulture's Row" on the deck of USS Kearsarge in 1952. The deck is covered with Banshees, Skyraiders, Panthers, and Corsairs. More than a dozen carriers had rotated through the theater by war's end.



Gene Bazore via Warren Thompson

Via Robert F. Dorr



For three years, the Navy blockaded the enemy's harbors and sea movement. It also took on the search-and-rescue role. Navy aircraft like the unarmed Martin PBM-5 Mariner patrol boat at left, based at Naval Air Facility, Oppama, Japan, flew antisubmarine patrols and served as transports.

Among the early jets that saw extensive duty in Korea were F-84s like the gaggle at right, with their classic lines broken up by bulky bombs hanging beneath them. (Capt. Arnold W. Braswell, who went on to become a lieutenant general, took this photo in January 1952.) The Thunderjet entered the Korean War in December 1950, by which time the UN forces that had reached the Chinese border the month before had become aware that the North Koreans were backed by Communist Chinese forces.



Arnold W. Braswell via Warren Thompson

The 3d Bomb Wing Douglas B-26 at right had flown in the South Pacific in World War II. The venerable Invader was among the FEAF's combat aircraft that did yeoman work, blunting the North Korean advance, gutting the enemy's logistics by destroying railroads, roads, factories, and troops and transport assets in the field. Below right, a B-26 crew member catches on film air-to-ground rockets streaking toward a bridge in North Korea.



Via Robert F. Dorr



B-26 crews flew their first mission into North Korea in June 1950, bombing an airfield at Pyongyang. In July 1953, a B-26 crew from the 3d Bomb Wing dropped the last bombs of the war, on Wonson, minutes before the cease-fire took effect. The service changed the A-26s to B-26s in 1948, as the separate Air Force came into its own. In an odd turnaround, some of the same basic type of aircraft would be upgraded and see service in the Vietnam War, redesignated A-26.



Mary Jackson via Warren Thompson

Via Robert F. Dorr



The Korean War saw the development of forward air control techniques when North American AT-6 Texan trainers were fitted for the FAC role, or "mosquito missions." In cooperation with a ground FAC, the Mosquito pilot did some of the riskiest flying of the war, marking the targets with smoke rockets. Lightly armed and slow enough to attract small-arms fire, these fore-runners of today's tactical air control parties and combat control teams pioneered techniques in air-to-ground operations that are still in use.



At left, B-29s from the 93d Bomb Squadron, 19th Bomb Group, are en route to a bombing mission over Taechon, North Korea, in September 1951. USAF's strategic bombers were mobilized early in the war. FEAF's 19th Bomb Group, the only B-29 group outside Strategic Air Command control, moved immediately to Kadena AB, Okinawa, and flew bombing missions from there to North Korea. In the US, SAC alerted the 92d and 22d Bomb Groups. Nine days and 8,000 miles later, they flew their first combat missions—a tribute to flyaway kits, crew resilience, and SAC theories on mobility. By July 1950, two additional wings had been alerted, and the big bombers were used for interdiction and battlefield support, as well as to bomb strategic targets in the north.



Forced to fly at night by the MIG threat, B-29 missions were long and dangerous. This 307th Bomb Group Superfortress (below left) ran into night-flying MIGs and anti-aircraft artillery over a target. Unable to return to its base in Japan, it crashed into a mountainside near Taegu AB, South Korea.



Above, at Kadena AB in 1951, Bugs Buster loads up for a night bombing mission over North Korea.

The Korean War helped forge many of the Air Force's finest leaders. At right, Daniel "Chappie" James, then a captain, begins another day "in country" in 1950. He flew F-51s and F-80s on 101 combat missions with the 12th Fighter-Bomber Squadron. He went on to become commander in chief of North American Air Defense Command and the first African-American four-star general.





For the long haul: The C-124 Globemaster II was the largest aircraft in the Korean War and the only one able to carry many of the Army's vehicles. When it first became operational in the Far East, it was only allowed to land at major bases, such as Taegu, Kimpo, Suwon, and Osan, to prevent wear and tear on smaller tactical air bases used by fighter-bombers. Earlier transports hauled cargo to Korea by departing from Travis AFB, Calif., refueling at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, Wake Island or Midway, and Yokota AB, Japan. The C-124A could fly from Travis to Yokota nonstop. Here, a C-124 unloads cargo, including troops, at Kunsan AB, South Korea, in spring 1953.

For the short haul: C-46s gained their greatest fame by airlifting supplies over "the Hump" in the China-Burma-India theater during World War II and continued in service in the Korean War, transporting cargo. Here, C-46s line the runway at Pusan, South Korea, in October 1950. Transports racked up 999,381 flying hours in the war.



Through the UN, 19 nations offered trade, technical, economic, or medical assistance to South Korea during the war, and 15 joined the US in sending military forces. At left are two aircraft of the Royal Australian Air Force's Number 77 Squadron at Kimpo AB: an F-51 Mustang being worked on in the foreground and a Gloster Meteor Mk. 8.



Via Robert F. Dorr

Communist China rocked the world with massive intervention on the side of North Korea. Attacking Chinese forces drove UN troops below the thirty-eighth parallel again. China also sought air superiority by introducing the sweptwing MiG-15 jet fighter—many piloted by Russians. USAF responded to the MiG challenge by sending the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Wing to Korea with F-86 Sabres.

The F-86 was similar to its main adversary, the MiG-15, but training and experience gave Sabre pilots the edge, and they posted an imposing 10-to-one kill advantage. The first battle between sweptwing jets took place on December 17, 1950, when Lt. Col. Bruce Hinton sent more than 1,500 rounds into a MiG before the MiG inverted and dove straight in.

At top is a typical scene in a revetment, with a crew chief and a pilot going over procedures before the Sabre heads north. Above right, two F-86s from the 335th Fighter Squadron fly in formation past Mount Fuji, Japan, in 1953.

F-86s, like the one at right, could be pulled apart, but maintenance (often done outdoors) was never easy. Troops suffered from bitterly cold winters, hot summers, and torrential monsoon seasons.



Ed Hughes via Warren Thompson



Iven Kincheloe via Warren Thompson

The gunports of his aircraft blackened by the heat of battle on May 18, 1953, Capt. Joseph C. McConnell, Jr., is greeted by squadron members on returning from downing his last three MiGs, making him the top-scoring ace of the Korean War. Although he had completed 106 missions in Korea and had requested 25 more, Captain McConnell was immediately ordered home from Suwon, having entered Air Force history with 16 jet-to-jet victories.

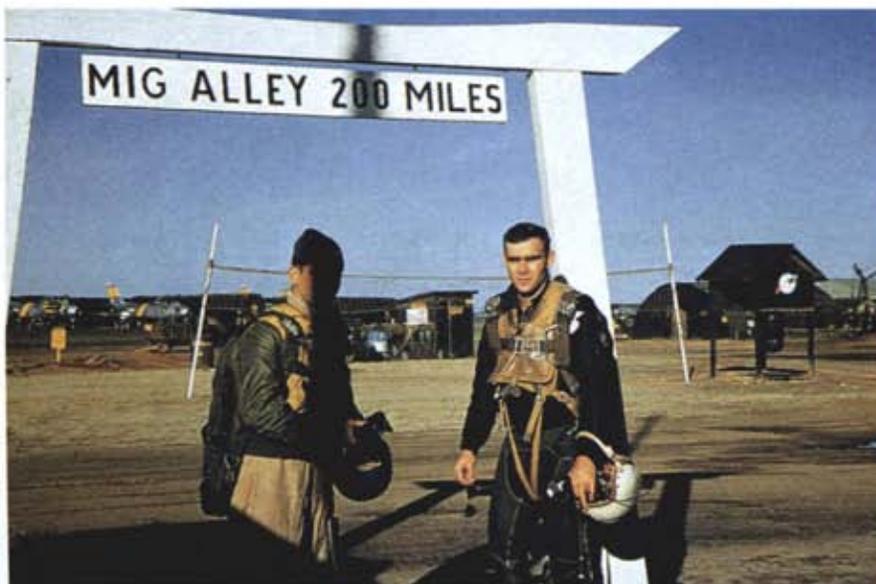


Gil Lowder via Warren Thompson



Most pilots saw MiGs from the vantage point shown above, including these Korean War aces, l-r: 1st Lt. James F. Low, Capt. Robinson Risner, Col. Royal N. Baker, and Capt. Leonard W. Lilley. Risner went on to serve in the Vietnam War and survived seven and a half years as a POW in North Vietnam. He retired as a brigadier general.

Lt. Dick Erratt (on the right) and a fellow pilot from the 336th Fighter Squadron stopped in front of one of the icons of the Korean War, the torii near the operations building and flight line at Kimpo AB. In July 1951, with the war at a stalemate, negotiations began at Panmunjom, North Korea. Although the war never came to a formal end, an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. US forces remain in South Korea today, including more than 8,600 USAF personnel. ■



Dick Erratt via Warren Thompson